Becoming a University Teacher of English in China: a Narrative Inquiry of a Foreign Teacher’s Transformative Identity Construction

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Abstract: Teacher identity construction has drawn great attention in applied linguistics. Although many achievements have been made in this area, inadequate study has been carried out concerning the identity construction of foreign teachers. This study discusses how the changing teaching contexts generate new demands for foreign teachers of English as a foreign language in China, and how their ideology in teaching affects their identity formation and practice. It is based on a narrative inquiry of the professional identity of an EFL teacher, Kent, in a Southern-China university. The study examines Kent’s lived experience as an EFL teacher throughout his 3 years of teaching in China, and it explores how he has adapted, struggled and transformed his conception of his identity as a teacher in response to the changing cultural context.

Keywords: Foreign teacher identity; Identity construction; Case study
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Teacher identity construction has drawn great attention in applied linguistics. The previous studies in teacher identity mainly focuses on two areas: characteristics of teacher identity and factors contributing to teacher identity construction. In terms of characteristics of teacher identity, scholars in the field of teacher research basically agreed that teacher identity is fluid and shifting from moment to moment and context to context (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Kelchtermans, 1994; Volkmann and Anderson, 1998). Regarding the factors that influence the development of teacher identity, review of the literature suggests individual and social dimensions as two lines of inquiry. Many studies address the individual dimension of

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teacher identity and argue for the importance of the teacher’s personal biography; significant people who impacted their beliefs about teaching and the image of what it means to be a teacher; earlier learning experience, pre-service and in-service teacher education (Boullough, 1997; Knowles, 1992; Jackson, 2006; Tsui, 2007). In addition to the individual facets of teacher identity, previous research has also explored the social dimensions of a teacher’s professional identity, which refer to the influence of contextual factors on the teacher’s identity construction. Previous studies have found that social culture, school culture, relationships with colleagues, and students can have either positive or negative impact on teacher’s professional identity (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Day et al., 2007; Lee et al., 2013; Zeichner & Gore, 1990).

Although many achievements have been made in this area, inadequate study has been carried out concerning the identity construction of foreign teachers. The present study will discuss how the changing teaching contexts have generated a new demand for foreign teachers of English as a foreign language in China, and how their ideology in teaching affects their identity formation and practice. This study is based on a narrative inquiry of the professional identity of an EFL teacher, Kent (pseudonym), in a Southern-China university. It examines his experience as an EFL teacher throughout 3 years of teaching in China and it explores how he has adapted, struggled and transformed his teacher identity along with the changing teaching contexts.

1. Theoretical Framework: Interplay of Three Factors Contributing to Teacher Identity Construction

This study adopts a tentative conceptual framework on teacher identity as mapped in Figure 1. It emphasizes the interplay of variable factors in the construction of a teacher’s identity, placing an emphasis on personal, professional and contextual factors. This framework is an integration of Wenger’s identity formation theory and the theory of History-in-Person.

In Wenger’s theoretical framework, identity construction is reflected in terms of three modes of belonging: engagement, imagination, and alignment. Through engagement, individuals establish and maintain joint enterprises, negotiate meanings and establish relations with others (Wenger, 1998). Imagination moves beyond the physical limits of engagement by enabling individuals to create images of the world, and their place within it, across time and space. In terms of alignment, Wenger contends that it is “the process through which modes of belonging become constitutive of our identities by creating bonds or distinctions in which we become invested” (1998: 191). Alignment translates into the membership in social communities, which constitutes the formation of one’s identity as a form of competence—the competence of knowing who we are and who we are not (Wenger, 1998).
The present study also employs the History-in-Person theory because teachers’ professional identities are largely manifested through their discursive practices. Viewed from the perspective of their sociocultural and historical origins, their words in the classroom must be viewed as History-in-person processes. History-in-person theory represents the generative fashioning of individual identity and self-making through their relationship with local conflictual practices in the past and present (Holland & Lave, 2001). This study will analyze the personal trajectory of a foreign EFL teacher in a Southern-China university. Since teacher identity construction is a continuous process, this teacher’s personal and professional experiences and current practices are both pivotal in shaping his professional identity.

To sum up, this integrated conceptual framework is built on the knowledge about teacher identity. The construction of identity is an ongoing process and the development of a teacher identity is influenced by a range of personal and contextual factors (Coldron and Smith, 1999; Beijaard et al., 2004). Thus, the conceptual framework divides these into three categories that impact teacher identity construction: personal, professional, and contextual factors. The personal factors include teachers’ personal biographies, important people who impacted their beliefs in teaching and teacher images, critical life events and so forth. Professional factors include teacher education programs, new pedagogies, and the community in which the teacher practices. Broader contextual factors include national curriculum reform; specific challenges of the workplace environment; the culture of the local community; and relationships with colleagues. This framework also applies to the present study. As foreign teachers of EFL coming to work in China, with the changing teaching context, they must adjust and transform their conception of teaching, which is rooted in their earlier experiences and professional education.
2. The Study

Three research questions guided this study according to the above conceptual framework:

(1) How do teachers’ early experiences as a language learner affect his or her language teaching beliefs and instructional practices in the classroom?

(2) What conflicts do foreign teachers encounter in the professional practice? How do foreign teachers formulate their professional identity through resolving the conflicts?

(3) How do foreign teachers solve the conflicts and problems with the institution? How do the contextual factors affect the construction of their identity as teachers?

3. Context and Subject

The workplace context including school culture, students and teachers’ relationship with their colleagues are important factors that influence the construction of teacher identity. The following section will introduce the situation of Kent’s work place, students and colleagues.

Kent works in a Southern-China university which was first founded in 1964 and merged with another university in 1995. It is a key provincial comprehension university with 25 separate faculties and 72 majors for undergraduates. Kent works in the faculty of English, where there are 92 teaching staff, including five foreign teachers. Foreign teachers are mainly assigned basic core courses such as reading and writing. Some foreign teachers with specialized research interests will have chances to offer courses such as drama workshop, linguistics, and literature. Most of the core courses in this faculty have more than one teacher; therefore, there will be a teaching group working on one shared syllabus. Some major specialized courses would have one or two teachers and they will share a more flexible syllabus. Sometimes teachers can submit to offer courses on their own.

Students in the faculty where Kent works are all English majors and they will be screened into four directions when they are in their junior year: literature, translation, cultural studies and information. In the first two years, they take basic core courses such as listening, reading, writing and debates, etc. which are all compulsory courses. They can also take optional courses such as English poetry, Linguistics and Chinese culture. In the third and fourth years, after they choose their specialized direction, they will take common core courses for all majors and also the courses for their specialized direction. For example, if a student chooses literature, he would not only take core courses like American Literature or journal reading, but also Short Fiction, Drama, and Poetry courses.

Teachers who work in one teaching team, such literature, have a unanimous syllabus and objectives. It might allow each individual teacher slight changes upon
the teaching plan but since there will be a shared final exam, minimal revision is allowed. Teachers meet three times a semester at least to discuss the syllabus and final examination. There are also requirements for teachers to sit-in and audit at least two colleagues’ courses and give evaluations.

Kent came to work in this university two years ago as a foreign language teacher. He graduated from an American university with a master’s degree, followed by two years of previous university experience in north China in 2016. At the time of the study, his teaching experience totals four years. Kent taught four courses in the faculty of English of this university: English Writing, American Literature, Foreign Journal Reading and Debate. For all of these courses he has to work with a teaching group. Kent also worked independently to teach courses on writing short fiction, nonfiction, and poetry to students in a different faculty. Before he came to China, he also worked as a teaching assistant while he studied on his master degree in United States. In North China, he offered courses on literature and creative writing, and was the sole person in charge of designing the syllabus for those courses.

4. Methodology: Narrative Inquiry of Teacher Identity Construction

This investigation was conducted mainly through a narrative inquiry. Connelly and Clandinin (1999) refer to teachers’ professional identity in terms of “stories to live by” (p.4). According to them, stories provide a narrative thread that teachers draw on to make sense of their experience and themselves. As Beijaard et al. (2004) point out, “Through storytelling, teachers engage in narrative ‘theorizing’ and, based on that, teachers may further discover and shape their professional identity resulting in new or different stories” (p. 121). Kent’s narrative was constructed and reconstructed over a period of 4 months. It started with face-to-face conversation once a month. It was reshaped and enriched as I responded to his reflection by sharing my own experiences in a more dynamic and dialogic form between two of us. Finally, we had intensive face-to-face conversations over a period of one week during which Kent relived the stories that he had told.

The analysis of the data was conducted in the following manner. First, the data were sorted chronological from Kent’s high school learning experience to his current semester teaching this year. Second, the data were sorted according to his professional identity conflicts in terms of the three different courses he teaches when he is in China. For example, the conflicts he experienced when he offers a course on his own and when he is a member of a teaching group. Finally, the data were analyzed according to his transformative identity construction both in a micro-level such as in the classroom teaching practice and in a macro-level such as in the faculty and institution.

This study aims to abstract a journey of a foreign EFL teacher in China in formulating his teacher identity through adaptation, struggle and transformation.
5. A Narrative Inquiry of Kent’s Teacher Identity Construction On Being a Good Teacher

According to the History-in-Person theory, history is brought to the present through the minds and bodies of individuals (Holland & Lave, 2009). Since teacher identity construction is an ongoing and continuous process, teachers’ past personal and professional experiences are vital in shaping identity. Before Kent became a teacher or even before he became a teaching assistant, his understanding of being a good teacher came from his previous learning experiences. While he was asked the questions about the criteria of being a good teacher, he did not answer it directly, but reflected on an account of unpleasant experiences in his high school:

“I remembered one of my high school teachers and he would always ask the students such hard questions. I felt embarrassed when I couldn’t answer his questions in front of the whole class.”

As for Kent, this earlier experience made him think more on how to frame questions for his students:

“I will make my students talk a lot and I give them big, complicated questions to think about. People would be shocked how many questions I prepare for my students. It’s a way to get them to talk in the class.”

He also emphasizes the importance of subject knowledge and communicative skills for a good teacher:

“High school teachers probably don’t need any subject knowledge—they basically just give common knowledge and open a textbook, give a lesson. But the best university teachers, you assume they are not only good communicators but also unique sources the subject knowledge. They have insight you can’t find anywhere else.”

Kent acknowledges that his thoughts on what constitute a good teacher would be very typical in American university. These teachers are good communicators who show subject knowledge in a totally different way. Most people would agree these are the best teachers in America. He recalls what he had encountered in his school years back and reflects on the balance between these two aspects of being a good teacher.

Finally, he agrees that those who can give a decent class with good communication skills are better teachers than those who only have subject knowledge but worst communications skills. He also added that the latter should be working as a teacher rather than as a researcher. His view on being a teacher that “being a teacher requires obligation”. Kent’s ideas echo Johnson’s third approach towards teaching—a function-based approach which emphasizes the interactive communication between teachers and students (Johnson, 1992). A teacher’s role in teaching is to facilitate students in finding out their own effective approach in learning, and to
transmit knowledge and skills to students as well as to adapt their teaching approaches to meet students’ needs (Richardson et al., 1991).

6. To Be or Not to Be, it Depends on the Course

Depending on the course, Kent applies a different teaching methods. He is aware that second language teaching requires a different teaching method. Kent gives examples from his English Journal Reading class, where he has adopted new teaching method in response to the shared departmental syllabus. He regrets the course gives too little time for in-class discussion, but (keeping in mind the coming exam) he often assign reading comprehension questions to make sure students have a basic understanding of the material:

“My approach is to lecture in the first half of the class, then I will ask them to discuss to make sure they understand the issue. That helps to make sure they understand the learning objectives.”

It is interesting to mention that Kent talked about his teaching in China very different than his courses in America:

“I would ask students directly about their thoughts when I was at home. But now I increasingly cue the students more often in class as a guidance. You need to know the guidance is not usually the answer to the question. It would rather a frame to the answer of a question.”

Kent pointed out his change in teaching style by relating to his longer stay in China. There is a minimum requirement he thinks every student at least to acquire after taking his course.

In writing class, Kent would do the very similar way in his teaching as the reading class.

“Before I read students’ writings, I would do a lot of work in shaping students’ knowledge on writing an essay. After students read the sample input essay, I would ask hard questions and students would have millions of ways to answer the question. I must guarantee the students get the basic learning objectives.”

In courses that place less emphasis on basic skills, Kent chooses a task-based approach to teach the lesson, such as, literature courses, where he emphasizes systematic analysis and appreciation of literary texts.

“The way I teach literature is totally different, not at all like what I do in my writing lessons. It’s all very analysis-based. I REALLY REALLY REALLY want my students to pay attention to specific spots in the text, and look at specific words to interpret it.”

Even as Kent adjusts his teaching methods in accordance with different courses, he still comes across with conflicts when he teaches the same course with peer colleagues, such as Foreign Journal Reading course and American Literature
course. As for these courses, the course coordinator will set a syllabus for 12 classes of one grade. Teachers are required to teach the same chosen texts and students are required to take final exams at the end of the semester. Therefore, any “freedom” or extra discussion may come at the expense of final exam points. Kent felt this tension acutely during his American Literature course.

“I thought that I had the right way to teach my literature course, but before the final exam, when I was told about coverage of the test, I wasn’t allowed to see the final paper. I started to worry about my students, because I didn’t want them to fail the exam.

This time, Kent encounters a clash against the community of the teaching group. As a foreign teacher, he might not be aware of the situation in the group. Without asking, he would not be offered chances to know that more.

7. I Know I Will Stay

Kent started to recall “those good old days” when he first came to China to teach. It is a university in north China and he offered literature courses for the first- or second-year innovation students (students with excellent academic scores who can choose English as the second major). Even though it was not his first time to teach for he worked as a teaching assistant while he studied on his master degree, it is his first time to be a teacher of foreign language in China. When he recollected his stay in the first university where he worked, he felt excited to talk about it. But here in this university, he encounters his Waterloo because he started to doubt about his identity-in-discourse and identity-in-practice:

“I actually felt that my students were terrified to speak to me when I walked into the classroom like I am going to shoot them. Even though they are my old students, they would have a facial expression like ...(nervous) I think I am a student-driven person, but I don’t know why?”

Kent believes that he is a student-driven person and he felt that he actually practices in his classes. He gave the students a lot of questions to urge them to think about and he is patient in listening to his Chinese students’ responses in class. But he senses the gap between the students’ performance in class and their friendly relations outside the class. He once assumed that he knew much more about Chinese students, but has now come to question this certainty.

Kent’s mediation on his problem and he concluded it might be the institution. He was not nervous and worried about his identity of being a foreign language teacher when he was in the first university.

“I know the problem why I teach this way, because in this university, the semester is shorter and I was given a syllabus. I prefer to spend five classes on one story because I prefer to go very very slowly. I ONLY do this because I am here. If I teach the story in my own way, I wouldn’t have such a large reading load each se-
mester; four or five stories would be maximum. First, I will teach the story and then we will have an open discussion. So, I felt my way of teaching is so controlled for there is a short schedule.

The biggest struggle for Kent is how to balance the set syllabus and standardized exam with his own way of teaching. The semester in this university is shorter comparing to his previous unit, and the reading load in literature class is much heavier than before. This is particularly a problem as he feels the students resent and struggle to deal with a large reading load. He is aware of the risk he would take if he insists his own teaching style—his students would fail the final exam and even the course.

Literature class is not the only course he felt uneasy with: the foreign journal reading class is another concern. Similarly, it has a large reading load for the students, with quizzes and a standardized final exam for the whole grade. He made a choice to teach this course entirely through lecture, the first time he has ever done this in three years as a teacher. But he said he had no alternative: he would love to teach it as a student-driven discussion course, but he likes this university, this city. He knows that he would stay; therefore, he must meet the requirements of the university.

8. Discussion

Kent’s story shows that a teachers’ personal experiences plays a significant role in shaping their professional identity, whether they teach in a first or second language. The present study identifies the contributing factors on two levels: the macro-level and micro-level. The cultural context and the institutional environment exert an influence alongside the teacher’s personal biography, linguistic competence, and teaching beliefs as micro-level factors.

9. Micro-level: Teacher Identity in Personal Biography and in Practicing

Considered as a history-in-person process, a teacher ought to be viewed as a product of their sociocultural and historical origins. Therefore, to understand the professional identity construction of a language teacher, personal history must also be included in the interpretive frame.

Before a teacher enters the teaching profession, their learning experiences facilitate the formation of their professional identity. Kent, the subject of the present study, his earlier learning experience influenced his instructional practice, teaching philosophy, and his teaching beliefs, and perception about students.

According to the interview, before entering the teaching profession, Kent’s view on being high school teachers indicates that he did not need to be either a good communicator or a master of subject knowledge. Teachers in high school
usually open a textbook and teach only common knowledge. It seems that as a student, he did not expect much from his high school teachers. Instead, he emphasizes the traits and qualifications of being a university teacher. Kent insists that there is a uniqueness among all the attributes for university teachers—“they are the unique sources of subject knowledge”. It implies two things: one is that university teachers are not only experts on certain subject, but also, they are specialized in the subject knowledge. Therefore, their teachings on the subject knowledge is irreplaceable. Kent also agrees that a good teacher should a good communicator. This manifest the functional-approach of his teaching philosophy, and while emphasizing his belief in the importance of interaction between the teacher and students.

Kent’s notions of subject knowledge and communication skills can be summarized as 

disciplinary knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge (Richards and Farrell, 2011). The disciplinary knowledge is a body of linguistic knowledge that a teacher should process and considered as essential knowledge to gaining membership of the profession. The pedagogical content knowledge means another line of knowledge that teacher draws from language teaching and learning practices and theories. This knowledge can be applied to solve practical problems in classroom.

When he studied in America for his master’s degree, Kent’s teaching experience related direction to his research background. At that time, he started to formulate his beliefs and philosophy in teaching. As his recollections of teaching in America indicate, Kent consistently emphasized discussion in his classes. His students were not second language learners but enrolled in his literature classes for the subject knowledge. As a postgraduate student, his disciplinary knowledge might not be sufficient; thus, he paid more attention to the communication between teachers and students.

After he came to China, besides the problems he had when he worked as a teaching assistant, he confronted cultural shock in terms of different students and teaching environment. What’s more important is that Kent did not have any professional training before and after he came to teach in university. He did not have enough time to develop his agency as a teacher, which might propel him to construct his professional identity as a teacher. Luckily enough, Kent was free to decide what to teach and how to teach when he took his first teaching position in a foreign country. To a certain extent, his situation was better in China than in his home country, which means his subject matter knowledge in literature or in English was more likely to be sufficient. In this case, Kent’s stay and one year’s teaching in the first university gives him a good chance of improve himself in pedagogical practices. As a foreign teacher, he could also grasp the opportunity to adapt himself to alien Chinese culture.

The following two years of teaching he spent in this currently working unit is the exact time for Kent to transform his teacher identity as a foreign language teacher. It is in this university he experienced the ups and downs of his career. Kent’s belief on teaching and teacher identity gradually became solid and concrete.
The role of teachers’ belief is a strong determinant of classroom practice (Deemer, 2004; Murphy, 2004; Tan & Saw Lan, 2011).

Of all the courses Kent taught in this university, he had both good times and bad times. He had chance to be invited to offer workshop on his special research interest in literature. But he was also restricted to teach in a much-controlled way—he can’t choose teaching materials nor he can avoid the standardized exams for the course. It seems Kent has not yet developed agentive quality in this period of his professional development. According to his narrative account, Kent still needs to improve his teacher agency in order to strengthen his capacity to make principled choices, to take action, and make that action happen in his future teaching career (Maclellan, 2007).

10. Macro-level: Contextual Factors Influencing Teacher Identity Construction

Kent’s story also illustrates how the construction of a teacher’s professional identity can be impacted and reshaped by their academic and sociocultural context. These factors are also crucial in influencing the constructing of their identity, especially for a foreign teacher.

The institution, serving as the major context a teacher works in, has been evidenced as an important source of factors influencing both teachers’ teaching practice and their identity formation (Beijaard et al., 2004). In the present study, the institutional factors may be interpreted in the following two perspectives: school context and peer teacher community.

As the working place where teachers spend most of their time, school is an important milieu and domain for the formation and development of teacher professional identity. As Lee points out, “schools have been considered as bounded containers in which professional identities of teachers are shaped by practices and social relations” (Lee et al., 2013). The university where Kent works now is slightly different from his previous one. Their locations are different; their need for foreign language teachers also differ; their in-service education for novice teachers and training programs for young teachers vary. The current working unit has many human resources for foreign teachers, as few foreign teachers can teach disciplinary subjects while working in China. Most of the time, they would be assigned to teach basic skill courses such as reading, writing, listening, speaking or debate courses. But in the northern Chinese university, where Kent may have been recruited for his special research interest, he was able to offer specialized courses such as poetry or fiction writing. It is even not possible for novice Chinese teachers of EFL to teach disciplinary subjects right after they graduate. It takes years for them to be capable to teach these subjects after they work with more experienced teachers. Kent was lucky but not that lucky in his current environment. He co-teaches those courses with peer colleagues with a set syllabus and most of the time requiring students to
take a standardized exam at the end of the semester, which leads him towards a persistent feeling of stress at lack of control over his teaching materials.

Colleagues can be influential in shaping teachers’ professional identities (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). In the present study, it is obvious that Kent did not develop a constructive connection with other colleagues and his peer teacher group. This would be helpful to shape the way Kent taught disciplinary courses such as American Literature and Foreign Journal Reading. There is not much effective collaboration between Kent and his colleagues. Due to Kent’s unfamiliarity with these small cultures of the courses, he did not communicate with his colleagues on the topic of teaching. As a novice teacher, Kent had received very little support from his colleagues. Even in such a difficult situation, Kent’s acknowledgement and recognition of his teaching competence has not handicapped the process of his self-recognition.

11. Conclusion

The process of teacher identity construction is complex. Many factors contribute to the transformation of a teacher from a novice one to an experienced one, especially a foreigner who teaches English as a foreign language.

As can be referred from Kent’s narrative inquiry on his identity formation, teachers’ personal biography, knowledge, belief, agency and classroom practice constitute the micro-level context for the formation and development of a teacher professional identity. Among these contextual factors, teacher professional identity starts to take shape from his personal learning experiences and his precious teachers role models. When they started to teach, these elements subsequently adapted to teacher’s instructional practices and gradually developed into their own disciplinary and pedagogical knowledge. Learned from Kent’s experiences for his long-term accumulation of knowledge, teacher agency plays a vital role. It is suggested Kent improve his agentive quality which would ignite his motivation and passion in acquiring new knowledge and expertise.

However, the external forces, such as the institutional context and peer teacher community, have also been found powerful on teachers’ professional identity construction. For teachers, especially the school context has strong and direct impact on teachers’ performance as proved in Kent’s case. The relationship with colleagues and peer teacher community is also important source of factors influencing both teachers’ teaching practice and their recognition of their competence from their colleagues. It is suggested for both parties (Kent and his peer colleague) work on the disciplinary courses in collaboration, especially for Kent, as mentioned above, his teacher agency should not be underestimated or even undermined.

This study has examined the teacher professional identity formulation of a foreign teacher who teaches in a southern China university. It finds that two major levels of influencing factors that affected the case teacher’s construction of profes-
sional identity: the micro-level and macro-level. Teachers’ personal biographies, their disciplinary knowledge and pedagogical knowledge, teaching beliefs and agentive quality created a micro-level of influencing factors, which played a significant role in shaping the teacher’s professional identity. In-service teacher education and the external professional training is also necessary and vital in its support for teachers’ knowledge base, especially for foreign teachers in China. The institutional environment and peer teacher community was discovered as the macro-level factor that exerts influence on the formation process of teacher professional identity. Overall, the transformation of Kent’s teacher identity as a foreign teacher of EFL would be a long way to go if he decides to stay and work in China.

Works Cited


